

Three Voices on the *Ode to Joy*

Ode to Joy (2005) by three young directors – Anna Kazejak-Dawid, Jan Komasa and Maciej Migas – met with a particularly favourable reception from both Polish filmmakers and critics, as only few debut films ever do. At the 30th Polish Film Festival in Gdynia, the jury chaired by Andrzej Wajda awarded the film the Special Jury Prize, calling it one of the most interesting movies of the younger generation. Nevertheless, critics noted some weaknesses and described *Ode to Joy* as a *good Polish film made by young people*¹ and an important voice in the discussion about the generation born in the mid-1970s, and their chances in the modern world². Does the film truly deserve attention as being exemplary of good Polish cinema, and talking about contemporary reality, and the problems of their peers, in an interesting and innovative way?

This piece is both an attempt to answer such questions, and a reflection of the conception adopted by Kazejak-Dawid, Komasa and Migas when they made the film consisting of three segments (novellas). *Silesia*, *Warsaw*, and *The Sea* – three short stories, three main characters and the same theme – an attempt to answer the question of why more and more young people choose to leave the country. Each of these artists tried to show the problem in their own way, at the same time adding his or her individual voice to the totality of *Ode to Joy*. The following short analyses of the stories in the triptych each focus on only one tale, and as such represent the critic's individual reflections focused on a segment of the work, although not devoid of references to the whole. When grouped together, they might be able to provide a sum of impressions and interpretations, which will create a more complete picture of the film *Ode to Joy*.

Silesia or the sketch for a portrait of a generation

GRZEGORZ NADGRODKIEWICZ

I had the opportunity to see *Ode to Joy* in 2005 shortly after its first screening at the festival in Gdynia. It appeared to me as something fresh in the context of new Polish cinema, unpretentious, and above all touching on important issues – as I thought then – related to what is usually called “a generational experience”. I leaned towards comparing this first impression to the feeling when one is faced with an exceptional work, which breaks the rules, is formally compelling and ori-

ginal – in short, when in artistic terms “the new is coming”. Aware of the fact that we rarely have the opportunity to participate in such ground-breaking events, and that the reason for this exalted reception might be influenced by excellent post-festival reviews, I decided to verify my belief over half a year later, when the film was released in cinemas.

It is evident that when we watch the same film again we either discover more qualities, or find confirmation of weaknesses instead. And such was my second viewing of the *Ode*. Reluctantly, I had to admit to myself that I must retract – at least in part – my previous words. My excuse can be only that earlier I spoke of impressions, and these are often volatile.

I write this having seen the film many times. In particular, I repeatedly viewed the opening short story, *Silesia*. Again, I went through all the reviews and press polemics, hoping to lose an unpleasant feeling of distance, and rediscover the compelling impression from the time of my first viewing of the *Ode*. Following these attempts to re-assess the film, I must, however, admit that it does not stand the test of time. Today I consider this film to be indeed technically skilful, but rather shallow wherever the directors try to attribute to the experiences of their protagonists the status of “generational experience”. More importantly, this very obvious interpretative formula carries fewer interesting insights than, for example, an attempt to look at the fate of the characters through the lens of a universal theme such as the entry into adulthood. Although I ought really to focus only on the tale *Silesia*, I must at this point say that the inconsistency between the declarative statements of the directors, and what they have shown in their films, is characteristic of all three novellas. *As a whole, this is a film about a generation, or about one of its fragments*³ – says Jan Komasa. Maciej Migas expresses a similar opinion about their joint project: *It was collective work, a film manifesto, the voice of a certain generation (...)*⁴. In a similar vein, Anna Kazejak-Dawid declares: *We decided to make a film, which would be a diagnosis of the situation of our generation*⁵. From the statements of the three young directors we gather that they treated making the *Ode to Joy* as a way of expressing their to some extent common experience⁶. Therefore, the words of Maciej Migas are puzzling, for he says: *We are a generation who has no common experiences*⁷.

Is *Ode to Joy* the voice of a generation?⁸ Does it deal with experiences shared by a larger group of people, so intense that with time they could be considered as being common to the whole generation? Or does this film only address the problems of the few “elect”, who are strong, determined and brave enough to leave their old life behind, escaping stagnation and crossing the British border at Dover or in one of London’s airports? And finally, in view of all these questions, do the makers of the *Ode* speak on behalf of their peers, or simply “toy” with the subject, cleverly exploiting all its emotionality and the nostalgia of contemporary emigration – “for money”, “against stagnation”, “for love”, “against the daily grind” and “just for the sake of it”? In asking questions relating to the whole movie, not just to the story of *Silesia*, and in trying to provide answers, I probably work against the formula of this article, and devote too much space to the two remaining segments of the *Ode*. But I do so deliberately, believing that only through a wider reference to the other films by Komasa and Migas can we clearly show *Silesia*’s director’s views on the generational experience, in which she might have taken part.

Silesia by Anna Kazejak-Dawid is the only novella which implements the creative intentions of all three directors. We cannot conclude that rapper Michał from the *Warsaw* story is part of the wave of emigration for money (or for any other reason: a decent life; personal development; new prospects; or simply to enjoy equal opportunities in the social sense). He will no doubt work in London as a labourer on a construction site, or a washer up at the “kitchen sink” of a second-rate restaurant, but his motivations for leaving are of a very different nature – he leaves “for love”, in search of his girlfriend. Likewise Wiktor, from the last section of the film by Maciej Migas – although he announces to everyone that in London he has a job waiting for him, and a flat, his departure is simply the result of what happened to him after his return from college. He cannot cope with real life, and the only radical solution at that moment is to seize the opportunity to go to England – this is what he finally decides to do. Perhaps if somebody had just asked him to join a monastery, or if his girlfriend from Warsaw was still willing to tolerate him as a lodger and lover, he would not think of leaving Poland as the best and only solution in his tough life situation. Only Aga from the *Silesia* story fits the pattern of a young contemporary emigrant with all its consequences. This does not, however, mean that what she is experiencing is tantamount to a generational experience.

The beginning of the movie shows the moment of Aga’s return to Poland, where for a short period of time she will try to live her adult life. Together with her boyfriend, who awaits her return, she will rent a flat (even if only for a short while); with the money earned in London, she will buy, refurbish and re-start the hairdresser salon where until recently her mother worked; she will sometimes visit her father who is on strike in the mines – this can be interpreted as an attempt to restore the lost relationship with her parents’ generation⁹. But everything that happens to Aga upon her return to Poland will be only of a thoroughly temporary nature, the semblance of a new life in the home country. This is particularly well illustrated by the scene in which Aga, together with her mother and a friend Danka, renovate the hairdresser salon. A desperate effort to return to the “heyday”, accompanied by the half illustrative, half diegetic music “from the old days” (Krystyna Prońko’s song *You’re the cure for all evil*), seems to have no chance of success. Aga’s entry into adult life in her home country, at least this time, proves to be unsuccessful. On the one hand she has to sacrifice her own plans (giving up the rented flat with Waldek) to help her unemployed mother, on the other – she is helpless in the face of the fact that her father’s generation is trying to stay afloat at the expense of young people, who want to build their world free from the burden of their parents’ Solidarity past. Very meaningful in this context is the scene where Aga wants to sit on the flag which carries the Solidarity logo. Her father reacts strongly (*No, no, no – you will not sit on it. You will not sit on Solidarity!*), and the girl, surprised, replies: *Chill out, Dad* (this can be interpreted as an expression of young people’s attitude to the ideals of their parents’ generation). Another scene, which also takes place in the mine, develops this; Aga comes to her father shortly after her hair salon is ransacked during the riots that accompany the marching strikers, and states her position very bluntly by saying: *Dad, if you go to the bottom, it does not mean that you have to drag me there with you*. Trying to break free from the entanglements of – to put it diplomatically – this tough daily life, Aga decides to return to London. When her father, following the end of the miners’ strike and his return to work, asks her in

a sincere, albeit full of laconic answers, conversation about her reason for leaving again, she replies: *It's called survival instinct, Dad*. The novella's closing conversation with her father and above all the epilogue, integrating all three parts, in which the main characters of each story meet on a coach, emphasize Aga's situation as that of a typical emigrant – suspended between “here” and “there”, a stranger both abroad and in the home country. Her story comes full circle and returns to the starting point, thus confirming that her destiny is synonymous with living an emigrant's life; it is determined and conditioned by it.

The makers of the other short stories use the symbolic, to them, trip to London somewhat on the principle of *deus ex machina* – they make it into a solution, and even though it is previously mentioned in the plot, events do not necessary lead to it. In the case of Aga, however, London is both the beginning and the end, so essentially her life. She returns home disappointed and tired from her year in England, where – as she says – she was a “mop-pusher”, but goes back again, because in her home country she will not get anything better. Her fate, however, is not depicted in dark colours. Aga does not give up after her first failure, and takes on the challenge thrown up by life. Despite what she has experienced in her country, she is still able to fight for herself. What is more, she believes that this time things will be better – she reassures her worried father: *Don't worry, Dad!*

At this point, it is fitting to return to the question of whether *Ode to Joy* (or at least its first novella) really encapsulates the voice of the generation born in the late 1970s. Perhaps it is more appropriate to pose another question: whether the film by Kazejak-Dawid, Komasa and Migas can ever be more than just a well-realized trio of voices on the coming of age, in each case marked by a departure to London. I think that it is inappropriate for the filmmakers to refer to the *Ode* in such terms as a “film manifesto” or “voice of a generation”. After all, such descriptions are significant and should, at the very least, reflect what might be considered a generational experience. Meanwhile in *Ode to Joy*, the trip to London (whatever its cause) is the experience of just a few people. We know of course that the film's protagonists are seen as representatives of a certain group, but I think that the directors have not implied clearly enough that the journey to England is for Aga, Michał and Wiktor a generational necessity, and the common denominator for a larger group of people. I do not attempt to settle here the question of whether it is possible to talk of unity for the generation born in the late 1970s, especially as more and more terms are being coined and promoted in the media, such as the “JPII [John Paul II] generation” or the “generation of 1200 [PLN] gross”. And so, I am all the more inclined to recognize the *Ode* as a portrait in three scenes, of not so much a generation, rather simply of a group of the “elect”: strong and enterprising – as Aga; going into the unknown and not caring what they leave behind – like Michał; and those lacking determination, but wanting to enact change in their lives – so Wiktor in *The Sea*. In other words, *Ode to Joy* is not the portrait of a generation that mass-migrates to Britain, but a cross-sectional look at those who do come to England. Thanks to this changed perspective, we can see that emphasis is distributed differently. It is not a whole generation that escapes from a grey and depressing country, but one part of it that comes to London – for money, in search of adventure and a more interesting, worldly life, or simply because it constitutes their idea of being an adult.



Ode to Joy, dir. Anna Kazejak-Dawid, Jan Komasa, Maciej Migas (2005)

Photo: Gutek Film

I have the impression that the makers of *Ode to Joy*, in particular Anna Kazejak-Dawid, achieved something completely different to what they had planned. The declared portrait of a generation does not materialise here. On the other hand, what can be seen in the film is something which, because of its novella-type structure, I would call a mini study of the “coming of age”. Returning to her hometown, Aga is almost from day one forced to switch from the London way of life (where she was pinching a “quid” here and there from the tips jar at the bar to pay for hot water) to abide in the “here and now”. She sees her father on strike, her jobless mother close to a nervous breakdown, and finally her boyfriend, a former miner, who now earns peanuts as a security guard. This situation gives her an impulse to act – she decides to invest her hard earned cash in a hairdresser salon. This one move reveals how much she has changed in London. Not only has she altered physically (she is slimmer and has grown up – as noticed by an aunt visiting her mother), but also mentally (*I did not even notice when you grew up* – says her father in the ending conversation of the film). Her maturity is evident not only in the responsibility she bears for her family, but also in her ability to get up after a fall, and carry on despite setbacks. Even if in the other two stories this is much less evident, there too we can talk about a study of the coming of age. The rapper Michał forgets about his musical career when he has to look after his sick grandmother, and after her death he decides to fight for what is now most important to him – the love of his girlfriend, Marta. Wiktor also makes his first manly decision in life: for the first time, he reacts firmly when the manager of the fish-processing plant torments his friend Eryk; and he will also discard the indifference and withdrawal that has characterized him since his return from university by throwing the TV set, which provides his father with mind-numbing entertainment, out of the window.

Describing Kazejak-Dawid’s story, I do not repeat opinions on its dramaturgic effects and formal solutions which have recurred in reviews of *Ode to Joy* (among others, the inevitable simplification dictated by the brevity of the film’s form, or the far-reaching stereotyping of characters ¹⁰) and which are not directly related to a possible reading of the generational problem in the film. However, I would once again like to raise the issue of the actuality of the *Ode*’s theme. Regardless of whether the trip to London is viewed as a generational experience, or simply as the dominant component of a generational experience, it is difficult to discern in Kazejak-Dawid’s film anything suggesting the director has captured an important issue that exists in the public consciousness. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the journalistic “immediacy” of cultural texts quite easily becomes obsolete. What is universal in this work will certainly survive. Seen from the perspective of several months or years, the younger generation’s desperate journeys to the UK do not seem quite so dramatic as the director suggests – some travel there for money, others to get an education (this is why Marta – Michał’s girlfriend from the story *Warsaw* – goes to London). If on the other hand we consider the film from the angle of a more or less painful coming of age, which evidently was not meant to be a dominant theme in *Ode to Joy*, we must admit that even two years after it was made, the film can still “defend itself” and is worthy of attention. But we are already talking about the universal aspect of the work, the layer which makes use of eternal themes, and if the creators are a keen observers of reality (and this can be confidently said of these three directors), they can certainly succeed in producing a re-

liable representation of the issue. More problematic, of course, is the repeatedly raised question of generational experience.

So is *Silesia* more than a story dealing with crossing the threshold into adulthood? If not a portrait of a generation (or one part of it, given that it is only one third of the *Ode*), might it contribute to it? It seems to me that it is more a sketch for a portrait, a trial drawing, in which different phases of activity or change are studied, to make them as close as possible to the original in the finished work; an artistic “dress rehearsal”, which shows a segment of reality, only fully realized in the final portrait. Such is the filmed novella by Anna Kazejak-Dawid. It shows the fate of a girl who could become an exponent of a generation. It is important here to emphasize the conditional tense. Aga could be part of a generation which is “going to London”, if we were confident that this mythical London is a generational determinant, that it is dominant among the generational experiences of people entering adulthood at a similar time to her. And of course, it is not right to interpret each of the segments of *Ode to Joy* as a sketch, which taken together make up a portrait. Rather, they are all at most a contribution to an overall portrayal of a generation, for they only deal with one segment of reality. Anna Kazejak-Dawid’s sketch for this portrait of a generation seems to be the most detailed; it is closest to conveying the meaning of this experience, which in Komasa’s work is only caused by a romantic impulse of the heart, and in Migas’ by a desperate attempt to overcome one’s own helplessness.

GRZEGORZ NADGRODKIEWICZ

Warsaw or the choices of a rapper from the capital

EWA CISZEWSKA

The middle novella of *Ode to Joy* raised extreme reactions among viewers. According to a reviewer from “Gazeta Wyborcza”, the film by the young director appears schematic and banal, qualifying it as the weakest of the set ¹¹. In contrast, Bartosz Staszczyszyn considers Komasa’s novella as the best short story in the whole film: *Dramaturgically refined and well directed, it goes beyond the limitations of journalism. Apart from a few scenes (the vision of working in a large corporation), Komasa tries to avoid clichés and ready-made cultural situations. Thanks to this, the film is moving and memorable* ¹². It is easy to find the source of this controversy: some critics are irritated by the schematic plot; others delight in the authenticity of characters and emotions. But no one can disagree with the statement that out of the three stories it is *Warsaw*, in spite of its simplicity and predictability, which contains the largest dose of drama and tension. Undoubtedly its excellent acting is also to its advantage – the leading actor, Piotr Głowacki, in particular deserves praise and was nominated in 2006 for the Zbyszek Cybulski Prize.



Ode to Joy, dir. Anna Kazejak-Dawid, Jan Komasa, Maciej Migas (2005)

Photo: Gutek Film

The main character in the film is Michał Krzemiński, better known as DJ Peras in the hip-hop world he frequents. He and two friends are trying to break through into the music industry. The beginnings are not easy: he has to find equipment, hire a studio. But the biggest problem turns out to be the people, or rather the lack of them. His friends lose heart and energy, and have no time for rehearsals. Peras, whose parents are dead, only receives support from his grandmother (Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieślak). His girlfriend Marta (Roma Gąsiorowska), daughter of a wealthy businessman, also occupies an important place in the life of the hero. The girl's father, Piotr (Maciej Kozłowski), is not too favourable to the union of the young people. An up-and-coming rapper, who consistently refuses Piotr's offer of work in his company, is not in his eyes the perfect candidate for fiancé of an attractive, well-educated, and rich girl. Peras, wishing to live in harmony with himself and his professed values, comes face to face with a merciless world where all that matters is quick success and a job with social prestige.

In the novella *Warsaw*, we are very clearly shown the clash of the two worlds. On the one hand are those for whom capitalism has brought tangible benefits, in the form of a villa in the suburbs and a high-powered job in a glass tower in the centre of the capital. This is the world of those who – like Piotr – want to send their children to London, not to earn money, but to attend a prestigious university, to obtain, or rather “to consume”, an expensive education. At the other extreme are the people represented by Peras and his grandmother – with a flat in a communal block, no money to buy a mobile phone, who ride on the city's buses, and live from hand to mouth. People like Peras are always rejected at the “gates” of a trendy club. *Wrong face, wrong clothes, wrong night* – our hero is told by the bouncer in the club where Marta was having fun¹³. The very title – *Warsaw* – suggests a possible axis of conflict. The capital is the place of the fastest growth, the headquarters of companies and corporations – a space of social contrasts. It is to here that people from the provinces come (compare: *Warsaw* by Dariusz Gajewski, *My Place* by Leszek Dawid) in search of fortune and success. The choice of Warsaw as the place of action in Komasa's film is therefore entirely justified.

The clash of these two incompatible worlds is most painfully felt by the hero, when he finally agrees to work in Marta's father's company for a trial period. Peras was quickly made aware that working in a firm is a constant struggle for a better position and the favour of the boss. In this game anything goes: sucking up, denouncing, back stabbing. At all times one has to watch one's step and not reveal any weaknesses, as they will without fail be immediately used against one. Michał experiences humiliation at every step and is unable – in contrast to the hero of *Zawal (The Heap)* by Sławomir Shuty, also working in a corporation – to adapt and grit his teeth. For him, it is not enough to invent never expressed repartees, or to imagine one thousand variants of an explosion of the premises. Already on his first day he falls out with his superior and is called by Marta's father a fool and an imbecile. In effect, Piotr gives him a clear order: to stay away from his daughter. Peras' failure in a “real” job is the pebble which tips the scales and determines Piotr's aversion towards his daughter's boyfriend. The anger and bitterness of the hero, the shock suffered when hearing threats from the girl's father, but also the previously mentioned refusal of entry to the club, which results in a brawl with the security guards – all this leads to an impulsive break up with Marta. Peras rejects

the girl who belongs to the world which is the cause of his humiliation. The end of the relationship between this hip-hop Romeo and a nouveau-riche Juliet is not simply a consequence of the young couple's behaviour. It is the result of "force majeure"; the two worlds have proved incompatible. Łukasz Kłuskiewicz draws attention to a similar problem when discussing Komasa's novella: *Money barriers separating Marta and Michał prove to be too significant. They are children of the same culture, they understand each other very well, they share a mutual affection, but they belong to two worlds. (...) To be what one should not be, is enough to completely cease to exist. There is not one and the same world for everyone* ¹⁴.

This hypothesis of hostile worlds that do not allow "racial mixing" gains additional support if we look at the families of Marta and Peras: Michał was brought up by his grandmother; only her father is present in the girl's life. Our attention is drawn to these strong emotional bonds. For Peras, his grandmother is undoubtedly the person closest to him; they support each other and are conversation partners. On the other side, Piotr is the loving father: he wants to provide the best education for Marta. Although he is not fond of Michał, for a while he tolerates him as his daughter's boyfriend. His feelings for Marta are most vividly depicted in the kidnapping scene, where Michał threatens his girlfriend with a knife. The agitated Piotr is capable of doing anything, as long as his daughter is not hurt. So it is not that the newly rich have no feelings while the less moneyed show greater empathy. Everyone is able to love in their own way. Only social barriers do not allow a happy ending for some relationships.

The engagement with social issues of Komasa's film manifests itself clearly in the rap sung by Peras' hip-hop band Tesla. The characteristic features of this music are, on the one hand, the language of the street, full of vulgarities and often modelled on prison slang, and on the other, an uncompromising criticism. *Rap, on social issues, wants to be the partisan of the poor, the exploited, the disadvantaged, the stultified – but this does not mean being on anyone's side. Rappers, just as fiercely as they do those at the summit of power, also attack all the others, young and old, for their conformism, lack of reflection, or greed* ¹⁵. Rappers are on the side of those "at the bottom", at the same time being wary of any ideology. It is worth quoting here the lyrics of a song by Peras, recorded with Tesla for a radio contest: *I had no other chance, no other choice / In the city where money means status, beer is a delicacy / But not for everybody life is a race / You dream about status, wake up and you are a nobody / Cash was never my goal / I would lose if I thought with my wallet / Zero in the account, for some I am a zero / But I have pure emotion, pure intellect / All of you raise your hands up like me / Let's kill what the politicians say / They make shady fortunes, others lie at the bottom, sons of bitches / They did nothing for me or you / This makes me wander in the night / And only see happiness when I look in your eyes / Thanks. Strong beat, strong lyrics and sounds / Only you well know / Tesla band, man / Tesla band, man / It never misleads / Clean as a whistle – choose me for president.*

These words clearly reveal an involvement on behalf of the underdog – with whom the author of the above text identifies. It reveals the belief that getting money and social status are associated with selling oneself and giving up professed ideals. This correlation seems to be embodied in politicians. For the author, the only positive element in this so-perceived reality is his much-loved girlfriend. The final

words of the rap are not a ruthless call to the polls, but an indication as to the model of political life that would be most satisfactory for the subject. This is a defence of transparency and honesty, lacking in politicians. Peras' text is his *credo* – the way he perceives the world, the values he upholds. For him, rap is the bright side of life, an area where he can express his views. At the same time, he places feelings very high in his hierarchy of values – something which is confirmed in the final part of the film when Peras has a chance to record an album and start his rap career, yet decides to follow Marta to London instead.

The strength of Komasa's film is that it does not construct a simple opposition: honest rappers and hypocritical others. Michał's friends do not necessarily identify with the message of the song. For them, hip-hop is a way of passing time, and also a lure for girls. Some of them get discouraged when they have to demonstrate a minimum of consistency and commitment. Disgusted with his friends' attitude, Michał is thus bitterly disappointed by the hip-hop scene. What is more, the world of the media and alleged "fame" turn out to be flat and uninteresting.

The song by Peras features in all three novellas of *Ode to Joy*. It is worth emphasizing that we get to know its full version not in Komasa's piece, but in *Silesia*. The song accompanies a scene involving Aga and Danka having fun – the girls fool around, drink beer and dance. The director inserts the song into the film's text in a most interesting way: we hear the first tones at the end of the previous scene, which shows Aga and Waldek having a conversation at the mine. Then the music "moves" to a scene played out at the back of the gym. The initial suggestion that we are dealing with non-diegetic music turns out to be misleading¹⁶. Aga and Danka are dancing, singing, as if they can hear the music and the lyrics. The footage clearly indicates that Peras' song comes from the world shown. Through an open window, we see a young man lifting weights – it is very likely that he has turned on the radio, or a CD player. Thus the rapper's song also becomes part of the protagonist's world in the first short story. Aga and Danka willingly approve of Peras' music. Even if they are not carefully listening to the text, they accept it intuitively. It is significant that it is precisely in the opening novella of *Ode to Joy* that Peras' song appears in its entirety. Consequently, it becomes the motto of the whole movie, a refrain repeated in each story. Such an interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the song by Peras was selected as the sound track to the *Ode to Joy* trailer. Significantly, this song always resounds in moments when the mood – even if not strictly speaking optimistic – is certainly hopeful. Aga is just back in Silesia, talking to her father, meeting her boyfriend, and having fun with her girlfriend. For now, the world looks pretty good: chances are that everything will work out well. Peras' sound track appears in a similar moment in the novella *The Sea*. Wiktor is just back in his hometown when, on a fishing cutter swaying on the sea, the song by the rapper from Warsaw can be heard playing on the radio.

It would be too great a simplification to reduce the message of *Warsaw* to the level of a piece of propaganda, even though it certainly operates using clichés and set formulas. But it manages to avoid this unidimensionality; it does not divide the world into good and bad, sincere and hypocritical. Rather than depicted as decayed that part of society that did not benefit from the transformation of Polish existence, we see instead the workings of love in the family of the city rapper, who is taking responsibility for his actions. Nor does the director drop hints that would designate

the family belonging to the financial elite as dysfunctional – Piotr not only loves his daughter, but also reveals to her his feelings; he has a strong bond with her. In the film, there is also no apology for hip-hop culture – the musicians benefit from their popularity (they date girls coming to concerts) and objectify the music they have created. So we are not dealing here with a class struggle, but rather with an individual's choices and priorities in life. Michał finds his place in hip-hop – this subculture best reflects his values and way of life. But he might as well be a hippie, metal musician, hacker or someone who does not belong to any subculture. The choices he makes – an open rebellion at work, staking everything on one card in the name of love – place him amongst the uncompromising (although already life-experienced) idealists. *Warsaw* clearly promotes enterprise, courage and individualism, contrary to the escapist tendencies¹⁷ prevalent in recent Polish cinema. And although these values do not provide for an easy life, they certainly determine its quality.

EWA CISZEWSKA

The Sea or why Wiktor goes to London

JADWIGA MOSTOWSKA

The focal point of discussions about films such as *Ode to Joy* is usually the term “generation”¹⁸. Although I am aware that in describing the achievements of the youngest group of Polish directors, who in their films tell the story of their peers, one cannot completely give up considering them in a broader social context, whilst – according to the formula of this article – focusing on just one story of the triptych, I wish, at least partly, to get away from generalizations and generational tracks and focus on the personal story and finding an answer to the question: why does Wiktor find himself on the coach going to London.

The heroes of *Ode to Joy*, Aga, Michał and Wiktor, meet in the final part of the film, the epilogue connecting the three novellas, as passengers on a bus going to the British capital. Why are they there, why have they decided to leave the country? In the case of the protagonists of the first two novellas, Aga (*Silesia*) and Michał (*Warsaw*), the combination of events that lead to their decision to go away, and the internal motifs of the characters, seem rather obvious. Against this background, the reasons for which Wiktor decides to leave appear to be the least apparent.

After breaking up with his girlfriend, twenty-something Wiktor leaves Warsaw. He returns home, a small seaside town. But here, unlike in the case of Aga in *Silesia*, no one is waiting for him. The boy cannot count on support and understanding of the kind which the rapper Michał gets from his grandmother. His parents are not happy with his return. His father pays no attention to him, too busy watching a television game show in which he plans to take part, and his grumpy mother openly

shows her displeasure. She reproaches Wiktor for “living off” his parents again, and wonders aloud about the point of studying, which clearly was only a waste of time.

Wiktor lives in one of the caravans which his parents rent to holidaymakers in the summer season; it is for him a substitute for independent living. He finds work, but his studies in the capital are not really of much use – one does not need a degree in order to gut fish. Besides, the owner of the smokehouse who hires him treats all his employees contemptuously. He addresses Wiktor as “student”, but the condescending tone leaves no doubt that he considers him a spineless loser and a wimp, and higher education seems a mere whim to him. The boss also sees nothing wrong with delaying payment of his employees, whilst buying himself a new car. Wiktor does not feel comfortable in the knowledge that he has to do such a job. However, although he is able to accept for a while the lack of pay, like his other workmates in the smokehouse, Rysiek and Eryk, who for fear of losing their jobs do not rebel against the employer, he finds it hard to endure his boss’s sneering remarks. When it comes to an altercation between them, the hero prefers to resign rather than be dismissed. He does not want to go back to this job, even after some persuasion by his workmates, as it would entail apologizing to the owner. For now, his pride prevents Wiktor from taking this step. He prefers to regale his friends with a beautiful fantasy of how he will go to London, where a job and a flat will be waiting for him. But it is not Wiktor who is usually the boss’ victim. The “whipping boy” is Eryk, who endures in silence the pushing around and biting remarks, not really able to count on the support of his workmates (Rysiek does not want to put himself at risk, and Wiktor is too self-centred, busy with his own problems, and defending his dignity). Eryk also dislikes the manager because of the advances he makes to his mother. So when Wiktor mentions leaving the country, Eryk also sees his chance and proposes to finance their journey abroad.

Of course Wiktor is not satisfied with his present situation, but it seems that the only thing that really occupies his mind is not work, but trying to keep his relationship with his ex-girlfriend Kinga alive. The motives for his repeated telephone calls to his former partner are not, however, completely clear. Is it the strength of his love that makes Wiktor try to win back her favours, or the fear of losing his only constant point of reference so far, which gave him a sense of security? It is difficult to answer these questions, because little is known about the relationship between Kinga and Wiktor. It seems the break up occurred on the girl’s initiative and the hero has had to leave her apartment and return to his parents. The cause of the couple’s separation is not disclosed – the parting scene, which opens the novella, is devoid of dialogue and consists of a few shots only. That this relationship was quite important to Wiktor is demonstrated by later scenes. A few hours before his departure to London together with Eryk, he decides to visit his former girlfriend. It seems that Wiktor does not really want to leave, and if Kinga would have him back, he would willingly stay. Because they end up making love, Wiktor hopes that all is not lost. But the young girl’s cold refusal quickly deprives him of all illusions. Even worse, because of this visit our hero is late for the coach, and the departure does not take place. This lateness will have other consequences, which in the final part of the film will put Wiktor on the coach to London, together with other characters of *Ode to Joy*.



Ode to Joy, dir. Anna Kazejak-Dawid, Jan Komasa, Maciej Migas (2005)

Photo: Gutek Film



Ode to Joy, dir. Anna Kazejak-Dawid, Jan Komasa, Maciej Migas (2005)

Photo: Gutek Film

Preoccupied with attempts to win back Kinga's favour, Wiktor remains almost completely oblivious to what is happening around him. He cares little about the feelings of his old school friend, Basia. Yet she seems to be the only person who is truly happy when Wiktor returns home. It is she who first suggests the possibility of going abroad, depicting it as an opportunity to escape to a better world. Wiktor reacts to this idea with scepticism, probably in large part because he still hopes to get back with his former girlfriend. At the same time, however, he exploits in a fairly ruthless way the fact that Basia shows him more than just a friendly affection. He borrows her mobile phone to call Kinga. He does not care how much pain he causes when he calls his ex-girlfriend shortly after he makes love to Basia. Anyway, this act seems to be nothing more than a satisfaction of his physical needs, and Wiktor does not attach much importance to it. Moreover, the way it is shown in the film, when contrasted with the sensuality of the lovemaking between Wiktor and Kinga, seems to confirm his lack of emotional involvement in the relationship with Basia.

Wiktor also cares little about what happens at home. His father is preparing for the preliminaries in the game show. But in the end he lacks courage and at the last moment gives up what he had been preparing for such a long time. His son finds him on the seashore, resigned and jittery. His father is ashamed of his weakness, and at that one moment of honest conversation with Wiktor he admits that he has wasted his life. He asks his son not to repeat his mistake, and then returns home to sit back in his armchair, watching TV. For him it is too late to change. After this conversation, which seems to be one of the key moments in the film, Wiktor decides to accept Eryk's proposal and to go to London. Since the first trip has not taken place, our hero is back at the starting point. Head down, he goes back to the smokehouse to ask for his old job. With open satisfaction the boss reveals his contempt for him, but after the intercession of his workmates agrees to hire him again. Wiktor is aware that not only has he failed himself, but he has also failed Eryk, who did not have the courage to go on the coach alone. It is revealed that for his younger friend the whole situation has had far more serious consequences. To finance the trip, Eryk stole money from the owner of the smokehouse. The boss has already beaten up the boy, and continues to abuse him physically and mentally at every opportunity. It is such a situation that gives the main hero, who until now has been almost completely passive and has subjected his behaviour according to the decisions of others, the impetus to take firm action. Wiktor defends Eryk and raises a hand against his supervisor. There is no going back to the smokehouse now. His parents do not offer him any support and a visit to his former girlfriend in Warsaw deprives him of any illusions as to the possibility of rebuilding their old relationship. Wiktor decides to go to London. But before that, in a symbolic gesture of breaking with passivity, he throws away his family's TV set, which obscured the whole world to his father and made him prisoner of the four walls and the armchair. The hero does not want to waste his life like his father has done. For him, there is still time to change.

Why does Wiktor finally decide to leave? Without knowledge of the English language, any promise of a job or even some temporary accommodation, the finale of this escapade does not look too optimistic. It could only be undertaken by someone who either likes taking risks, or simply has nothing to lose. It is difficult to un-

earth anything in Wiktor's character that would enable us to describe him as brave and go-getting. In contrast to what Bartosz Staszczyszyn writes in his review of *Ode to Joy*, there is also nothing in the film which suggests that this journey is the young man's dream. *Disappointment in love and the lack of opportunities make Wiktor want to get away from the small coastal town. The trip he dreams about is at the same time the source of his anxiety* – says Staszczyszyn¹⁹. Whilst it is true that Wiktor is anxious about his journey, it is hard to accept that he really wants to leave; after all, both when talking to Basia, and when Eryk makes his proposal of leaving together, Wiktor does not seem enthusiastic about the idea at all. Even when, following his resignation from his job at the smokehouse, he tells his work-mates about his plans, it is safe to assume that his tale about London, where a job and a flat supposedly await him, is an attempt to save face in a situation where he has thrown away the only job he had.

It seems therefore that Wiktor decides to leave because he has “nothing to lose”. The absence of an interesting job, a relationship, and family ties means that nothing keeps our hero from leaving his home. *Loneliness is their natural environment* – writes Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska about the young protagonists, in a text devoted to youth as one of the great themes in cinema at the turn of the century²⁰. Both Wiktor's character traits (passivity, introversion) and his life make him almost a model example of a person affected by loneliness, amidst people. Thus we can say that this young man leaves because he lacks strong bonds with his home country, his town, or the environment in which he grew up. Simply put, nothing holds him back. These reasons seem rather vague, but as it turns out, are sufficient. The hero wants to radically change his life. And what could be more radical than a journey into the unknown? That is why Wiktor does not even try to take other steps i.e. he does not look for a job in another town, nor does he think about a new relationship. He stakes everything on one card, although he is no gambler by nature. He will go alone on his journey to London. There will be no one there for him, no one about whom he cares. He can only count on himself.

The last short story of *Ode to Joy* seems to be the weakest of the three, not because *Silesia* and *Warsaw* are free of any weak points, but due to the fact that these two segments, filled with dramatic events, are more memorable. *The Sea* story, which is told slowly, with a rather expressionless protagonist, who perhaps arouses the least sympathy of the three, seems a little dull, compared with the other two. Wiktor's passivity, his focus on himself and his own problems, his hiding of his emotions under a mask of indifference – all this can cause the viewers to feel annoyance and impatience. *In the vast majority of cases, the hero's characteristics deviate from the norm, if the norm is a certain mediocrity* – writes Kazimierz Żygulski in his sociological study of the movie hero²¹. It seems that in this case the director has done everything to make his character embody precisely that norm perceived as mediocrity. The symbolic expression of Wiktor's attitude and life situation can be observed in the figure of a paraglider, noticed by him in one of the scenes. The man runs across the sandy beach, yet it seems that the glider does not lift him in the air but crushes him to the ground instead. It is difficult to believe that his efforts might be crowned with success. The ballast of the novella's hero is his character and approach to life. His attempts to change his situation are as pointless, desperate and hopeless, as the actions of the paraglider. Wiktor does not be-

lieve in his own success. He wishes that his life were different, but he lacks the strength to take control. He is struggling alone with the biggest obstacle on his road to change – himself. Wiktor is therefore an example of an anti-hero, lacking qualities which could win him the sympathy of an audience. We should appreciate the courage of Maciej Migas, writer and director of this part of the movie, all the more for deciding to tell the story of someone like him.

In addition to the previously mentioned paraglider, who can be regarded as emblematic of Wiktor's situation and attitude to life, there are other elements in the novella that – I think – we ought to interpret symbolically. The very title of the third part of *Ode to Joy* leads the viewer on this trail²². The sea as a symbol carries multiple, often contradictory meanings. *The Dictionary of Symbols* by Władysław Kopaliński gives a whole range of possible interpretations, but in relation to Migas' novella and its main character, the most relevant are those which treat the sea as a symbol of loneliness and immutability, but also variability, uncertainty, indecision, doubt on the one hand, and action, rebellion, adventure and discovery on the other²³. It should be noted that this discovery of the unknown, or the “going out” into the world that the sea has symbolized up till now, is now represented in Migas' novella, and in the whole *Ode to Joy*, by a new, contemporary and very telling sign – the coach to London. We must also remember that the sea essentially consists of water, which can also be considered symbolic, in a complex and broad sense. Water is, among other things, emblematic of infinite possibilities, the revival of body and soul and cleansing. Moreover, Kopaliński mentions that water can be conceptualised as a mirror, in the sense of it being like a mirror of the soul²⁴. Such a reading of the meaning of water seems particularly relevant in the context of *The Sea*, especially if we note how often the main character gazes at the sea, how often he walks alone on the shore, as if by looking at his reflection in the water, he might be searching both for the truth about himself, and for answers to the questions which plague him. Wiktor's father also goes to the beach to rethink his life, to look at himself, and to see in the water's mirror the face of a loser, who has wasted his best years. Water in the novella is omnipresent and is also found in the form of rain water, which symbolizes cleansing, blessing, truth, and ultimately sadness²⁵. For Wiktor, all these meanings are present in his final parting with his girlfriend. Now truly nothing, and nobody, keeps him in the country. A chapter in his life is irrevocably closed. Returning to the train station after seeing Kinga, Wiktor is drenched by the pouring rain. He is depressed. Although late for the coach, he has finally, perhaps by ridding himself of his illusions, realized it is time to start living his own life, time to take some action and make a change. No matter how we understand or interpret this more or less obvious symbolism, we ought to appreciate it as an attempt to add depth to a contemporary story by referring to symbolic meanings preserved in cultural traditions, even if we feel that Migas does not offer in this regard anything particularly new or innovative.

When describing the third novella of the triptych *Ode to Joy*, it is appropriate to say a few words about the style of the film. Photographs by Radosław Ładczuk, made in cool tones of grey, blue and green, make even a clear day seem gloomy and suffused with melancholy. These colours naturally correspond with the generally pessimistic message of *The Sea*, stressing the emotional mood of the main protagonist. The same effect is caused by the sluggish narrative present throughout

the story and by scenes in which a small male figure is shown walking on an empty beach, seen from a distant, bird's eye perspective. Wide-frame shots showing Wiktor by the sea contrast with the various narrow shots and close plans which are used in much of the film. The camera films the characters in a seemingly careless way. This hand-held camera sometimes "slides" off the faces of talking characters, showing a few unimportant views and details. Often an obstacle crosses its path – bars in the window, a curtain made of beads, a wire fence. Parts of the frame tend to be obscured by various objects that happen to "stand in the way" of the camera. The function of these elements seems to be quite obvious and clear – the viewer has the impression that he is observing real life, viewing authentic situations. The style of the novella, and the formal solutions adopted, can thus be regarded as correct and appropriate, typical of contemporary cinema and consequently rather conventional.

Admittedly, the novella-type structure of *Ode to Joy* has imposed on the authors some far-reaching simplifications. In *The Sea*, as in other segments of the film, we have characters whose description does not venture beyond stereotype. Examples are Wiktor's grumpy mother, an archetypal domestic tyrant, or the owner of the smokehouse – a caricature of a contemporary Polish capitalist. Moreover, some narrative solutions proposed by Migas seem rather improbable; for example, the fact that Wiktor and Eryk go as far as Warsaw in order to travel to London. Obviously, this was necessary to resolve the Wiktor and Kinga plot but such a "round-about" way of travelling to Britain is somewhat improbable. Despite all the small slip-ups which might be pointed out to the maker of *The Sea*, it has to be said that *Ode to Joy* would not be a better movie without the third segment. On the contrary, it seems that the last part is a natural complement to the overall picture shown by the young Polish filmmakers.

JADWIGA MOSTOWSKA

Translated by KATARZYNA KRZYŻAGÓRSKA-PISAREK

First published in: „Kwartalnik Filmowy” 2007, no. 57-58, pp. 160-179.

¹ M. Grochowska, *Oda do radości* (review), “Kino” 2006, no. 4, p. 70.

² Cf. B. Staszczyszyn, *Złęknieni*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 2006, no. 17.

³ *Nie ma filmu bez ognia* (Jan Komasa in conversation with Maciej Dominiak), “Cinema” 2005, no. 9, pp. 20-21.

⁴ *Nie dam się “sformatować”* (Maciej Migas in conversation with Maciej Dominiak), “Cinema” 2006, no. 3, pp. 18-19.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ In general, only Maciej Migas openly admitted that the topic of *Ode* is to a large extent close to his personal experience: *This film grew out of a generational experience. For my generation London has become a symbol. The thought of leaving was close to me. I was already on the verge of deciding to take a leave of absence in college and go on to London to find work. Fortunately, a few months before*

the planned departure, it turned out that we won a scenario competition and there was a good chance of making a movie (Nie dam się “sformatować”, op. cit.).

⁷ D. Karski, *Oda do szarości*, “Film” 2006, no. 4, p. 51.

⁸ On various aspects of generational experience in the youngest Polish cinema, cf.: Ł. Kluskiewicz, *Generacja NICponi. Gdzie są buntownicy?*, “Kino” 2006, no. 4; M. Grochowska, *Pokolenie frustratów*, “Kino” 2006, no. 7-8.

⁹ During one of these visits, the father asks: *How did you get in here?*, and Aga replies: *How am I...? Fine. Thanks for asking* (this and subsequent quotations from the film's soundtrack).

¹⁰ Cf. among others: M. Grochowska, *Oda do radości*, op. cit.; Ł. Maciejewski, *Oda do radości* (review), “Film” 2006, no. 4.

¹¹ P. Felis, *Oda do radości* (review), “Gazeta Wyborcza” on 14.04.2006 (quoted in: [301](http://ser-</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

- wisy.gazeta.pl/film/1,22535,3279137.html /accessed: 4.02.2007/).
- ¹² B. Staszczyszyn, op. cit. (quoted in: <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/1548,1330295,dzial.html> /accessed: 4.02.2007/).
- ¹³ Andrzej Grella, a reviewer of the leftist "Nowy Robotnik" (New Worker), on the account of the social topic appearing in the work by Kazejak-Dawid, Migas and Komasa called *Ode to Joy* (and a film *The World is waiting for us* /2006/ by Robert Krzemppek) the hope of the Polish cinema. The author notes: *The in-human treatment of workers by employers occurs both in a small fish processing plant in Pomerania, as well as in a large corporation in the capital. Regardless of whether they smell of fish, or walk in suits – the workers are humiliated, robbed, even beaten...* A. Grella, *Czeka na nas dno*, "Nowy Robotnik" 2006, no. 27 (quoted in: <http://nr.freshsite.pl/?nr=31&id=618> /accessed: 4.02.2007/).
- ¹⁴ Ł. Kłuskiewicz, *Generacja (sprytnych) NICponi*, in: *Kino najnowsze. Dialog ze współczesnością*, ed. E. Ciszewska, M. Saryusz-Wolska, Kraków 2007.
- ¹⁵ M. Filipiak, *Od subkultury do kultury alternatywnej. Wprowadzenie do subkultur młodzieżowych*, Lublin 1999, p. 88.
- ¹⁶ This process – raising uncertainty about the ontic status of music – was applied by the director in the scene of the refurbishment of the hairdresser salon, where action is accompanied by Krystyna Prońko's song (see the text by Grzegorz Nadgrodkiewicz on *Silesia*).
- ¹⁷ I lean towards the theory put forward by Malwina Grochowska in her text written in response to an article by Łukasz Kłuskiewicz *Generacja NICponi (Generation of Rascals)*, op. cit. The author argues that hidden criticism and constant willingness to rebel characterize the heroes of Polish cinema. Grochowska writes in the text *Pokolenie frustratów (Frustrated Generation): Of course, if looked at a certain way, each character that sadly roams the screen can be accused of representing "disguised criticism" and "hidden discord". (...) I do not believe in their "introverted contestation". (...) Instead, I see lost and confused people on screen, surrendering to an inevitable course of events or even to stagnation.* The author refers to the character of Michał in Jan Komasa's *Warsaw* as the exception that proves the rule (M. Grochowska, *Pokolenie frustratów*, op. cit., pp. 22-24).
- ¹⁸ A term used both by those who consider it legitimate to use it for groups of people born since the mid-1970s, and by those who ultimately question its usefulness in the description of contemporary social phenomena. See L. Kłuskiewicz, *Generacja Nicponi*, op. cit.; M. Grochowska, *Pokolenie frustratów*, op. cit.
- ¹⁹ B. Staszczyszyn, op. cit.
- ²⁰ A. Morstin-Popławska, *Młodość. Rzecz o duchowej bezdomności*, in: *Odwieczne od nowa. Wielkie tematy w kinie przelomu wieków*, ed. T. Lubelski, Kraków 2004, p. 53.
- ²¹ K. Żygulski, *Bohater filmowy. Studium socjologiczne*, Warszawa 1973, p. 40.
- ²² It is worth noting that, although the titles of the earlier novellas – *Silesia, Warsaw* – refer us to specific places and geographical areas, *The Sea*, to keep with the trend, should be called *Pomerania*. It remains, however, *The Sea*, as it refers not to a place, but rather to a state of mind and mood. To draw attention to this singular title of the Migas's novella, especially against the other two, seems all the more important that in some reviews as well as articles on the *Ode to Joy*, the third segment of the triptych was mistakenly called *Pomerania* (cf. M. Grochowska, *Oda do radości*, op. cit.).
- ²³ Cf. W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 2006, pp. 230-233
- ²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 480-484.
- ²⁵ Ibidem, pp. 62-63.